The Ritualistic and Theatrical Elements of Ashura

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by

Nooran Abdulkareem Fattah Al-Salihi

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Abstract of the Thesis

Ritualistic and Theatrical Elements of Ashura

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This thesis focuses on the Ashura performance in Iraq. Ashura (also spelled Ashoura) takes place on the tenth day of Muharram when Shia Muslims commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Husayn that took place in 61 AH/ 680 AD. It is a socio-religious phenomenon that combines ritualistic and theatrical behavior. My objective is to shed light on the interaction between ritual and theatrical behavior and how these work together to form the overall event. The first section introduces the historical background of Ashura, the second section explores the ritualistic and theatrical characteristics of Ashura, and the last, concluding section talks about the relation between the two aspects and how they work together.

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Introduction

Ashura is considered one of the most controversial and prominent topics in the Islamic world among Muslims. Some Sunni Muslims are against performing Ashura whereas Shia Muslims embrace the performance. My goal is not to criticize or promote Ashura but rather to study this phenomenon objectively. In looking at the Ashura performance, I will first examine what is ritualistic and what is theatrical about Ashura, and secondly what the relation is between ritual and theatre in the performance and how they work together to form the overall event.

Ashura is one of the most sacred days in the Islamic calendar for Muslims. On this day, the Ashura performance is held throughout the world of Islam. It helps people focus on the present moment, forgetting the secular world they live in. Reminding people to appreciate the life they have, Ashura gives meaning to life.

In Arabic Ashura simply means “tenth of the first month” (called Muharram). There are two versions of the story of Ashura for Sunni and Shia Muslims. The very early version (Sunni version) of Ashura is the story of Moses mentioned in the Qur'an. It is the day when Allah saved Moses and the Israelis from the Egyptians. After having a vision of someone taking his place and power, the Pharaoh (the king of the Ancient Egypt) was so weary of the Jewish people that he was torturing and killing them. Meanwhile, Moses was adopted and raised by the Pharaoh. After turning to manhood, Moses was made a prophet by Allah who asked him to go and talk to Pharaoh about Almighty Allah, the God who created Pharaoh

and everything. Full of pride, Pharaoh accused Moses of sorcery. He called up all famous magicians to defeat Moses. Allah helped his prophet with the power to turn a stick into a big snake, which ate the snakes of other magicians. When common people saw his power, they knelt praising and believing in the god of Moses. Pharaoh grew very angry at this treachery and sent his soldiers to kill Moses and his people, who believed and followed him. Pharaoh besieged Moses and his people who were trying to escape. There was no way but the river, so Allah split the river for them to pass to the other side. But when Pharaoh took the same way, the river swallowed him and his soldiers, killing them. By this, Allah[1] saved Moses and his people from the tyrant Pharaoh (Dwaikat). This story is what most Sunni Muslims relate Ashura to and fast for.

In the Shia version of Ashura, which is also part of the Sunni religion, the day commemorates the martyrdom of Imam[2] Husayn. The day of Ashura is a day of commemoration and mourning for Husayn bin Ali, the second grandson of Prophet Muhammad, who was assassinated in 61 AH (680 AD) along with his family and all men in Karbala, Iraq, one thousand three hundred thirty three years ago.

This day is considered a major holiday in the Islamic world and people usually fast on this day. In the Islamic calendar, the Ashura day comes after two other major

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[1] Christians believe that it was Jesus who saved Moses while the Jewish believe it was Yahweh.

[2] Oxford Dictionaries defines Imam (امام) as a title of various Muslim leaders, especially of one succeeding Muhammad as leader of Shiite Islam (“Imam”)

holidays, Eid al-Fitr (عيد الفطر) and Eid al-Adha (عيد الاضحى). Every year, the date of the Ashura change because it is based on lunar cycles used to define the Islamic calendar and not on the solar calendar used for other Gregorian calendars. In 2013, Ashura happened on Wednesday, November 13 and moved eleven days back the next year. For example, in 2014 it will be on the second of November.

In Iraq, as in Muslim countries like Iran, Lebanon, Bahrain, Turkey, Azerbaijan, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, the core countries that celebrate Ashura, preparations for the big event usually start two or three days in advance and reach a peak on the tenth day of Muharram. Every year, millions of Shia gather in Karbala from around the world to commemorate the death of Imam Husayn (may Allah bless him). They translate this sorrowful theme through a set of ritualistic and theatrical activities, including fasting, making special food like Hareesa, making public processions, reciting poetry, holding a marathon, performing self-flagellation, depicting the passion play (Tamthiliyah or Ta'ziyah), and performing Tatbeer (the act of cutting the forehead with sharp knives). These all happen on the same day and although the elements may vary in length and format from country to country, the theme is the same.

Opinions about whether Tatbeer is legitimate in Islam vary among Shia Muslims. Some Shia theologians (Shaykh) such as Majlesi (محمد باقرمجلسي), a Shia cleric during the Safavid era, are against Tatbeer and any kinds of violence against the body. Majlesi mentions the incident between Husayn and his sister, Zaynab زينب). When Husayn saw her hitting her head against the harness of the camel, he prohibited

her from doing that and told her to have patience (45:115). This kind of behavior has always been controversial debate among Muslims all over the world.

On the day of Ashura (the tenth day of Muharram), after the flagellation processions and before sunset, the passion play is performed lasting two to three hours (the duration may vary from year to year and country to country but the theme is the same). The Iraqi version of the passion play is simple and performed by amateurs and sponsored by the government or wealthy Shia clerics. Like any other street performance, the passion play faces some challenges. The organizers of the passion play use technical means of communication with the audience. Microphones, big loudspeakers and a second, backstage cast are sometimes used instead of the actors' real voices because the streets sounds in the vicinity overwhelm the voices of the performers.

As with many religious holidays, special foods are cooked for Ashura. Hareesa (also spelled Haressa) is the main food. For Sunni Muslims like myself, Hareesa is a means of being thankful for the blessings of God. Sunni consider this day as a day of remembering Husayn rather than mourning. I grew up in northern Iraq, Kirkuk, and a place where you can find people of different religions, sects, and ethnic backgrounds including Muslims (Sunni and Shia), Christians, Sabians, Arabs, Turkmen, and Kurds. My father told me once that in the 1950s these people shared with their brother Shia in Ashura celebration, giving out free meals and taking part in processions. I still remember the good days of making Hareesa with my mother at the stove and then sharing it with other Sunni and Shia neighbors. My mother still cooks it today!

For Shia Muslims, the day of Ashura is more than cooking Hareesa. Ashura is the commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn. The day has significance and sacred merits and privileges of which Shia theologians (Shaykh) remind people of. They stress that those who make pilgrimages to Husayn's shrine will have the love of Ahl al-Bayt (The Household). The Household refers to the family of the prophet Muhammad including his wives, daughters, his son-in-law Ali bin Abi Talib, and his two grandsons Hasan and Husayn. The article "Instructions by Grand Ayatollah" describes such a pilgrimage:

> 1. Those who have not visited Imam Husayn (peace be upon him) yet, will regret, on the Day of Judgment, of not visiting and not being martyred and buried with him.
> 2. Those of you who visit Imam Husayn's tomb regularly, should be proud of yourselves and know that they are the elite of Muslims and in a higher status and they are promised Heaven.
> 3. Entering Karbala, all Ashura-goers will be shaking hands with all prophets and Ahl al-Bayt (The Household) and will be blessed by Allah. They might not feel it now but they will in the future.
> 4. Husayn's visitors should know that they will get the above privileges only if they show virtuous qualities of faith: devotion to Almighty God, participating in the completion of good deeds, having good moral character.
> 5. As you are equal in things, you also unequal in other things. All of you will see and shake hands with the victims of Ahl al-Bayt (household) peace be upon them, but not all of you have the same status and this is decided by the Household and Imam Husayn (peace be upon them) themselves. It is not easy to be the closest to them. You have to work faithfully to earn your place.
> 6. The Prophet Muhammad himself (may Allah bless him) and his family will thank the pedestrians who come to visit Imam Husayn (peace be upon him). He will bless and take care of them in the Judgment Day.
> 7. During your visit to Imam Husayn (peace be upon him), pray Allah to protect and help your Shia brothers everywhere, especially the oppressed wounded people in Iraq.
> 8. The visitors should know the importance of visiting Imam Husayn in order to get his blessings and virtues. Imam Husayn (peace be upon him) witnesses whoever visits his shrine; hears their words and responds to them.

9. It is worth mentioning that visitors, when visiting Imam Husayn (peace be upon him), should try, in addition to supplication, to straighten or adjust themselves in order to be qualified enough.
10. Pursue, while visiting Imam Husayn (peace be upon him), that you will be serving Imam with your heart and you should agree on treating your families and relatives gently be kind and respect them.
11. Allah promises those who visit Imam Husayn (peace be upon him) a great reward and many properties including: the forgiveness of sins, and the right of intercession for those who intercede for him, and others.
12. The people of the house urge and encourage Shias and their loved ones to visit their martyrs, despite fear and danger.
13. The visitors of Imam Husayn (peace be upon him) will be merited, in the Day of Resurrection, many properties as stated in the following narrated from Imam باقر (Baqir)[3], "Allah will calm pilgrims down and they will receive the gospel that tells them, 'Fear not, nor grieve. This day in which you win.' "
14. Husayn's mother, فاطمة الزهراء (Fatimah az-Zahra), will ask Allah to forgive and erase the sins of those who visit Imam Husayn's shrine.
15. Allah will double the wage of those who spend money to visit and join the procession of Imam. (“Instructions by Grand Ayatollah”)

These are some of the rewards that the pilgrims and the Ashura-goers will be granted when participating in the Ashura performance and visiting Imam Husayn’s shrine. On every Ahura day, Shia Muslims try to participate in a way that will allow them to gain at least one of these rewards.

In conclusion, the Ashura day is very important to Muslims (Sunni and Shia). Despite its different references, all Muslims do consider Ashura one the most important days in Islamic history. Whether Sunni or Shia, people revive and replicate the suffering of Husayn on this day. With this introduction to Ashura, we will look at the events that make up the historical background of the holiday in the following section.

[3] Mu□ammad bin Ali al-Baqir (محمد ابن علي الباقر) is the Fifth Imam in The Twelver Imams.

1. The Historical Background of Ashura

This chapter highlights the historical background of Ashura through the story of Imam Husayn. It also examines how past events can influence future events. Ashura has not only religious meaning but also social and political overtones that challenge the existing order. Today, Shia politicians use Ashura against the Sunni government that tried to ban it centuries ago.

Husayn bin Ali bin Abi Talib (sometimes spelled Hussein, Hussain or al-Hussein) (بن علي بن ابي طالب الحسين) (13 January 626 AD – 13 October 680 AD) is the grandson of the prophet Muhammad (النبي محمد), son of Muhammad's daughter Fatimah az-Zahra (فاطمة الزهراء) and his cousin and son-in-law Ali bin Abi Talib (علي بن ابي طالب). Husayn is an important figure in Islam because he is the third of the Twelve Shia Imams after his father and brother, Hasan (حسن), and one of the members of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (*The Household of Muhammad*) (اهل البيت) ("Ali"). Husayn along with his older brother, Hasan, grew up strong, and religious, and supported with love from his grandfather, Muhammad. Muhammad loved his grandsons so much that he considered those who loved them to have loved himself and those who hated them to have hated him as well. As the boys became young adults, their reputations as descendants of Muhammad preceded them.

Husayn was strong and wise. Records tell us a story about Husayn and Hasan seeing an old clerical man incorrectly washing the end parts of his body, *Wudu' (وضوء)*, in preparation for prayer (صلاة). The two youths saw him and tried to show the man the correct way without being impolite and disrespectful. They approached him, arguing

with each other about the correct way of Wudu', and asked the clerical man to be the judge between the two opinions. They started and the old man watched them. By doing so, they told him indirectly the correct way to perform Wudu' (Qaseem).

Abu Bakr ibn al-Arabi states that the death of the Prophet Muhammad (570 - 632 AD) in Medina when Husayn was six years old led to many changes in the history of Islam. Although they were unified into one strong nation by Muhammad, Arabs started to split apart because of political disagreement. There was a period of wonder and confusion about who to choose as the successor to lead the modern Islamic society. The Muslims had a long discussion about the method to be followed in the selection of a successor. There were no rules that would help them choose the right governor and determine the best system of governance. Unfortunately, there was no agreement. This damaged and weakened the unity of Muslims and took Islam into a new direction which leads to the two different sects: Shia and Sunni. The two sects are still in disagreement today (Abu Bakr ibn al-Arabi 259).

In Mecca, there were two main tribes of Quraysh: Benu Hashem (also Bano Hashem) (بنو هاشم) and Benu Umayyah (also Bano Omaiyah) (بنو اومية). Benu Hashem included Muhammad, Ali bin Abi Talib and his two sons. Whereas Benu Umayyah included Mu'awiyah bin Abi Sufyan, the founder of Umayyad Dynasty, and his son Yazid (Ibn Saalih al-Uthaymeen 255) (See Fig. 1).

Whether Benu Umayyah and his people were Muslims or atheists is a controversial matter that enflamed disputes among Shia and Sunni Muslims that turned into an enmity that has continued for centuries. For Shia Muslims, Benu

Umayyah, unlike Benu Hashem, were corrupt, unfair, snobbish, and arrogant and acted like they were above all people of Mecca, Arabs and non-Arabs. On the other hand, Sunni Muslims understood Benu Umayyah as good Muslims who ruled with justice and did well on God's earth. This conflict continues between the two incompatible sides.

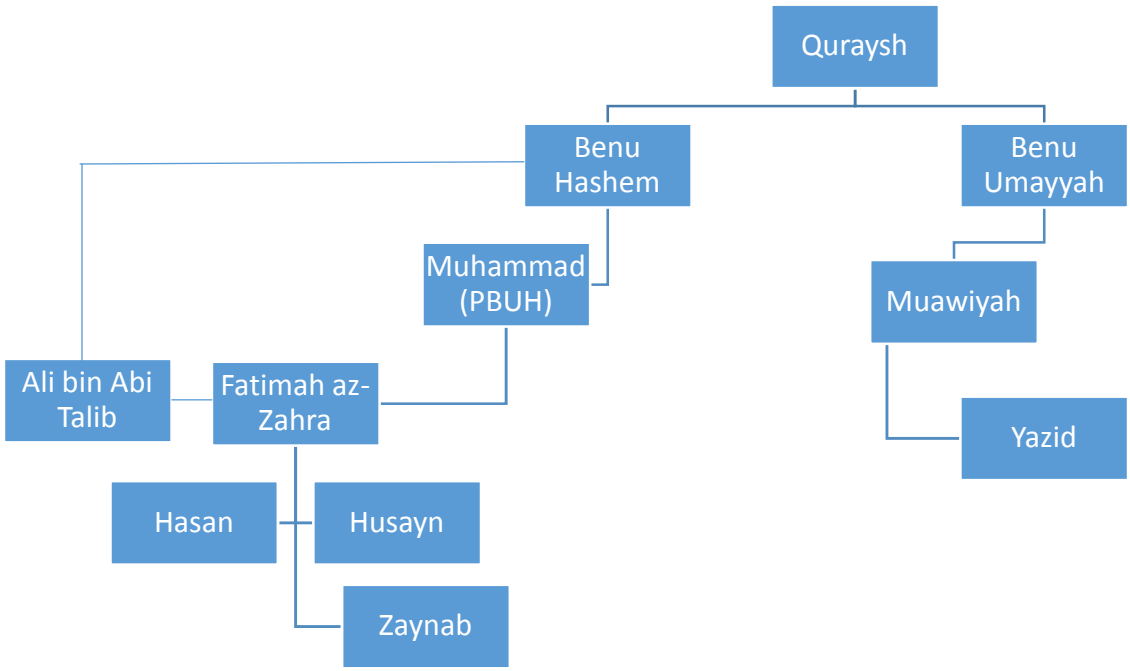

Figure 1: Family Tree of Quraysh tribes after 400 AD

After Muhammad's death, four caliphates (successors) (خلفاء) came to reign in the Islamic empire: The Rightly Guided Caliphs (632–661 AD)[4] , Umayyad Caliphs

[4] Abu Bakr al-Siddeeq (632-634 AD) is one of the first *The Rightly Guided Caliphs or The Righteous Caliphs* (الخلفاء الراشدون) that also include Omar bin al-Khattab (634-644 AD), Othman bin Affan (644-656 AD), and Ali bin Abi Talib (656-661 AD) who respectively ruled Islam after Muhammad's death.

(661–750/1031 AD)[5], Abbasid Caliphs (750–1258/1517 AD), and Ottoman Caliphs (1517–1922 AD).

At the time of Muhammad's death and before his burial, some Muslims argued that Abu Bakr al-Siddeeq (ابو بكر الصديق), the first Rashidun caliph, should be the first successor "caliph" to lead the Islamic empire since he was the Prophet's closest friend. On the other hand, others wanted Ali bin Abi Talib, the Prophet's son-in-law and cousin, to be the successor. Because of this dispute, an agreement made that both sides should wait for Ali to come after he was finished with Muhammad's burial ritual. The former did not wait for Ali because they believed in democracy rather than the current belief that ruling power is inherited. Eventually, and through *Shura (*شورى*)* (in Arabic, it means consultation and is a democratic vote used by Muhammad and his people in organizing the affairs of the Islamic empire), the argument resulted in appointing Abu Bakr as the leader and ignoring Ali and the Prophet's family[6].

Abu Bakr al-Siddeeq was the first of *The Rightly Guided Caliphs* and was followed by Omar bin al-Khattab (634-644 AD) (عمر بن الخطاب). Al-Khattab, the second Sunni caliph, reigned for ten years and both had Ali bin Abi Talib as their wise and trustworthy counselor. Under their rule, the Islamic empire flourished and succeeded.

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[5] Umayyad Caliphs included: Muawiya I bin Abu Sufyan, Yazid I bin Muawiya, Muawiya II bin Yazid, Marwan I bin al-Hakam, Abd al-Malik bin Marwan, al-Walid I bin Abd al-Malik, Sulayman bin Abd al-Malik Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz, Yazid II ibn Abd al-Malik, Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik, al-Walid II ibn Yazid, Yazid III ibn al-Walid, Ibrahim bin al-Walid, Marwan II bin Muhammad.

[6] Some records say that Ali gave his allegiance to Abu Bakr (632-634 AD) and supported him. The facts remain dubious until this day!

Abu Bakr kept the community united and Omar, with his firm administrative control and his strong military leadership, was able to expand the Islamic empire to encompass the Persian Empire (during these years Hasan and Husayn were still young boys) (Abu Bakr ibn al-Arabi 259). After the death of Omar bin al-Khattab by a Persian captive, Othman bin Affan (عثمان بن عفان) won the people's allegiance through Shura ("Uthman ibn Affan"). Being one of the members of Umayyah tribe, Othman was Muhammad's companion and the third caliph. His famous contribution to Islam is the expansion the Islamic empire to reach Syria, Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan, and the compilation of the text of the Qur'an into its current form. Othman's rule ended in 656 AD when he was assassinated in his house, leaving Medina[7] in political chaos.

After many days of restlessness, Shura was finished and Muslims agreed upon Ali bin Abi Talib as their fourth Righteous Caliph. In coming to power, Ali bin Abi Talib removed many of Othman's men from their positions and replaced them with men he could trust. This ignited disagreements between Ali's clan (Benu Hashem) and Othman's clan (Benu Umayyah) which resulted in the accusation against Ali for the assassination of Othman.

During Ali's reign, disorder and arguments among Muslims took place that resulted in many battles, some of which were the Battle of the Camel (حرب الجمل), and the Battle of Siffin (معركة صفين) between Ali bin Abi Talib and Muawiyah (or Muawiya)

[7] Also Madinah, a modern city in west Saudi Arabia, is the burial place of Prophet Muhammad and the second holiest city after Mecca. It is the city to which Muhammad and his followers migrated from Mecca. That day, 622 AD/1 AH, gave birth to the Islamic calendar.

bin Abi Sufyan (معاوية بن ابي سفيان), Muawiyah was Muhammad's secretary and one of Benu Umayyah clan, and established Umayyad Dynasty later on in an attempt to revenge the death of his kinsman Othman bin Affan. Taking place in Syria, this battle was the first civil war in Islamic history that broke the unity of the Islamic empire. Due to this split-up, Muawiyah bin Abi Sufyan took Damascus as the center of his dynasty while Ali bin Abi Talib ruled from the city of Kufa in southern Iraq. This disagreement over power ignited hatred which led to many battles among Muslims and the killing of the first three of the Twelve Imams: Ali bin Abi Talib and his two sons, Hasan and Husayn ("Ali").

Years passed and Ali bin Abi Talib was assassinated with a poisoned sword while praying in a mosque in the city of Kufa. This left the position of caliph to anyone who could be chosen by the Muslims through Shura ("Ali"). Muslims gave their allegiance to Ali's eldest son, Hasan, who was known for having wisdom just like his father. Hasan cared about his people and tried to keep the Islamic empire from splitting apart even if it cost him his life ("Bewildering Interpretation"). Hasan's main concern was to reunite the Islamic empire, therefore he left the crown for Muawiyah bin Abi Sufyan on the condition of the latter accepting a treaty called the Hasan-Muawiyah Treaty. This treaty listed the following conditions:

> 1. Authority will be handed to Mu'awiya [sic] provided that he should act according to the Book of Allah, the Sunna of the Prophet, and the behavior of the righteous Caliphs.
> 2. Authority should be for Imam Hassan after Mu'awiya, and if an accident occurs, authority should go to Imam Hussain, Mu'awiya has no right to entrust authority to anyone.

3. Mu'awiya should abandon cursing the Commander of the faithful (Imam Ali) and the practice of using the qunut in the salat against him, Mu'awiya should also not mention Imam Ali unless in a good manner.
4. The people should be safe wherever they are in the earth of Allah. Mu'awiya should give security to all races. The companions of Imam Ali should be given security wherever they are. Mu'awiya should not seek a calamity secretly or openly for Imam Hassan, nor for Imam Hussein, nor for any of the Prophet's Ahlul Bayt.
5. The people should be safe wherever they are in the earth of Allah. Mu'awiya should give security to all races. The companions of Imam Ali should be given security wherever they are. Mu'awiya should not seek a calamity secretly or openly for Imam Hassan, nor for Imam Hussein, nor for any of the Prophet's Ahlul Bayt. ("Hasan-Muawiyah treaty").

These conditions helped preserve everyone's rights. They were imposed by Hasan in order to be just and to ensure safety and secure of everybody.

Months after handing over his rule, Hasan and his brother Husayn went to Medina where Hasan was poisoned in 50 AH/ 670 AD. Some historians, such as Betts, say that Hasan was poisoned by his wife whom Muawiyah had once tempted with money (Betts 149). Due to the long running dispute between the Household and Muawiyah bin Abi Sufyan, Husayn attributed the assassination of his father and brother, Ali and Hasan, to Muawiyah because he wanted his son, Yazid, to be the caliph after his death (Betts 140).

One of the most controversial topics about Muawiyah bin Abi Sufyan is his decision to designate Yazid as his successor. This choice of Muawiyah moved the Islamic empire in a new dangerous direction resulting in the massacre of Husayn and his family. Moreover, it abolished one of the most important tools of democracy, Shura, making the governorship hereditary. According to Ibn Katheer, Muawiyah bin Abi

Sufyan was sorry for what happened between Ali bin Abi Talib, Hasan and himself, saying, "May you perish in confinement! You have ruled for forty years; as a commander for twenty of them and a caliph for the other twenty, and this is the condition of your fate? May the earth perish and all who love it!" (123). Some sources state that before his death, Muawiyah warned his son, Yazid, against mistreating Husayn bin Ali. Muawiyah's last words to his son were:

> As for Husayn what can I tell you concerning him? Be careful not to confront him except in a good way. Extend to him a free hand (literally, a long rope) and let him roam the earth as he pleases. Do not harm him, can show verbal anger but never confront him with the weapons of war but rather bestow on him generous gifts. Give him a place of honor near you and treat him with due reverence. Be careful O my son that you do not meet God with his blood, lest you be amongst those that will perish. (Korom 24)

According to Sunni Muslims, Yazid was a good man and worthy of being Muawiyah's successor, but the Shia Muslims did not agree. In spite of this dispute, Yazid became the caliph. However, Husayn was not satisfied with this because he thought that Muawiyah was responsible for the death of his father and brother.

Husayn bin Ali was brave, strong and honest, having made many contributions during the governorships of Othman bin Affan, his father, and his brother. He was appointed as Othman's bodyguard and took part in many battles and conquests during his father's caliphate. Husayn was the first to give his allegiance to his brother, Hasan. When Hasan was assassinated, Husayn kept the Hasan-Mu'awiyah treaty that was signed by Hasan and Muawiyah until Muawiyah gave power to Yazid as the next caliph. When Husayn heard of this news, he refused to give his allegiance to Yazid

because he believed that the next caliph should be decided by Shura. In addition, designating the power to Yazid broke the second condition of the treaty in an attempt to establish an illegitimate hereditary dynasty. Dakake states that this refusal on the part of Husayn to accept Yazid's rule was because the Umayyad Dynasty was not only oppressive, but also religiously misguided (81-82).

The Shia believe that Husayn left Medina for Mecca because the people of Mecca advised him to take Mecca as his base to fight Yazid. Meanwhile, people of Kufa in Iraq (where Ali bin Abi Talib reigned for five years) took sides with Husayn and stood against Yazid, believing that the leadership of the Islamic community should belong to the descendants of Muhammad (Balyuzi 193). They sent letters telling Husayn to come to Kufa and be the caliph since they did not have one. When Husayn became aware of the Kufa peoples' response to this matter, he was encouraged and hopeful. As he prepared for the journey to Kufa, both Abdullah bin Omar (بن عمر عبد الله) and Abdullah bin Abbas (عبد الله بن عباس)[8] advised him not to take his sisters, wife, children, and Hasan's children with him until he was certain of the allegiance of the Kufa people (Alkhazraji 482).

The Umayyad Dynasty was the second major caliphate, after The Rightly Guided Caliphs, to be centered in Damascus. Its caliph was also in charge religiously, politically, and administratively of other countries like Iraq (Ochsenwald 57). When Yazid heard that Husayn was up to something that would jeopardize the Islamic empire

[8] Abdullah bin Omar (عبد الله بن عمر) is the son of the second caliph, Omar bin Khattab. Whereas Abdullah bin Abbas (عبد الله بن عباس) is one of Muhammad's cousin.

by going to Kufa, he sent well-known Muslims to calm Husayn down, but Husayn insisted on going anyway. Husayn sent his messenger Muslim bin Aqeel (مسلم بن عقيل) to make sure the people of Kufa really wanted to give him their allegiance. Muslim bin Aqeel went to the city of Kufa in Iraq and found out that it was true. He sent Husayn a letter asking him to come because the people were ready to take him as their caliph and had given their word to stand for him against Yazid. The situation became more complicated when Yazid replaced the governor of Kufa with one of his cousins, Ubayd-Allah bin Ziyad (عبيد الله بن زياد). Yazid ordered him to keep order among the Kufa people and to keep an eye on Husayn's supporters. When Ubayd-Allah bin Ziyad became the governor of Kufa, he appointed a spy to follow Muslim bin Aqeel, who was busy preparing and planning with thousands of people of Kufa to welcome Husayn to the city. Ubayd-Allah bin Ziyad knew about the people's intention to accept Husayn as their caliph, so he talked to the people and gave them money to convince them to change their minds in order to prevent civil war and bloodshed. Meanwhile, Husayn was already on his way to Kufa with his family and followers. Muslim bin Aqeel was refused by everyone in Kufa and was caught and brought to Ubayd-Allah bin Ziyad. At this point he realized that there was no doubt that they would kill him so he asked for one last request to be granted. He asked for someone to go to Husayn, who was on his way to Kufa, and tell him to go back because the people of Kufa had been led by Ubayd Allah to turn their backs on him[9]. Unfortunately, Muslim bin Aqeel was

[9] At that time means of communication was primitive and the only means was human messengers and the message could take days to be delivered depending on the distance.

beheaded and his dying request was not fulfilled. While approaching the city of Kufa, Husayn heard the news of the death of Muslim bin Aqeel. Husayn turned to his sixty followers including Muslim bin Aqeel's brothers, to ask their opinion about whether to go back or go ahead. Muslim bin Aqeel's brothers decided to continue to Kufa, seeking revenge of the death of their brother ("On the Anniversary of the Martyrdom").

As Husayn and his followers got closer to Kufa, they found the city army waiting for them. Since Husayn did not have enough men to stand against the army, he asked his followers once again if they wanted to go back. No one agreed to do so and the opposing army sent a man to negotiate. Husayn was wise and he knew his people and family would suffer so he told the man that he did not want war and that he wanted to be granted one of three options: go back to Mecca, continue on his way to Kufa as a guest, or go to Damascus to talk to Yazid. Ubayd-Allah bin Ziyad did not agree to any of these choices, and instead confined Husayn and his followers in the desert now called *Karbala*[10]. They set up a tent and stayed there for three days. Stories about what happened after this event vary between Shia and Sunni Muslims (Radhi al-Deen 102). Shia tend to exaggerate and add many details. They say that Husayn and his followers were besieged for three days were mistreated and humiliated by Yazid's men. They also believe that Husayn and his family became hungry and thirsty and asked Yazid's men to allow them to drink from Euphrates water, but Yazid's men were ruthless. They

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[10] Karbala, located about 100 km (62 mi) southwest of Baghdad, is a city in Iraq. It is the place where the Battle of Karbala (680 AD/ 61 AH) took place. For Shia, it is considered one of the holiest places after Mecca and Medina.

killed Husayn's six month year-old baby with an arrow to the neck. After three days, on the tenth of Muharram, the bells rang to announce a battle in Karbala. The two sides fought, and as a result, Husayn was beheaded and his family taken captive in chains and sent to Damascus (Malmoos1).

The Sunni Muslims believe that Husayn's family was treated well and that none of the bad things mentioned by Shia story were done to Husayn's family by Yazid's men, except their eventual killing (Malmoos1). They believe that Yazid did not know about the battle and upon hearing, he felt sorry and asked his men to bring Husayn's women, who were carried on horses and camels, to Damascus where they were welcomed and given places to stay. One source describes when Yazid's men brought Husayn's head to Yazid in his mansion. Muawiya's servant narrates Yazid's reaction:

> When Yazeed [sic] came with al-Husain's [sic] head and placed it in his hands, I saw Yazeed crying and he said: 'If there had been any relationship between Ibn Ziyad and al-Husain then he would not have done this (referring to Ibn Ziyad). (Katheer 152)

Imam Husayn's head was taken back to be buried with his body in Karbala. His shrine is very sacred for Shia Muslims who come from all around the world to visit every year. The death of Husayn is of importance not only to Shia but also to Sunni Muslims. AlShafi'i, one of the most prominent Sunni jurists and founder of the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence, left us his poem about the sufferings of the Ahl al-Bayt, referring to Imam Husayn as a martyr. He writes "a man slain for no wrong he had committed, whose shirt is dyed as though in crimson" (AlShafi'I as cited in Ayoub 166). The poet then goes on to vividly depict the event of Karbala: "there was much wielding

of the sword and great clatter of the spears, and of the horses there was much sobbing after sorrowful neighing" (AlShafi'i as cited in Ayoub 166). Collectively, this unfortunate incident had a negative effect on Islam. The Islamic empire became divided into different sects of Shia and Sunni that continue to dispute about the massacre of Imam Husayn even today.

Shia politicians, in using performance for political purposes, drew from these complex feelings and opinions in developing the Ashura. Shia are considered to be the second largest sect in the Islamic world after Sunni Muslims and form approximately 10-20 % of the Muslim world. They live mostly in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain. Sunni Muslims, who make up the majority of Islam, have concerns about the Shia, their politics, and their faith. The Sunni people believe that if the Shia were to come to power, they would eliminate the Sunni completely. Therefore, Sunni Middle Eastern politicians and leaders limit and even ban Ashura ritual, while others allow it only under certain conditions, such as Saddam Hussein did in Iraq for 35 years. Ashura was also banned by the Ottomans during the Ottoman rule from1534 -1920 AD in Iraq to avoid possible religious conflicts. However, the villagers often performed it anyway in protest against Ottoman rule ("Ottoman Empire").

The Sunni are threatened by Ashura because of what it symbolizes. Shia consciously combine politics with faith, and if they took the power, Sunni believe that they would be in danger of elimination. The in turn would lead to endless disputes and the division of the Islamic world such as what is now happening in Lebanon and Iraq. In Iraq, Shia power has been increasing since the downfall of Saddam's regime in

2003. In 2004 the people were allowed to form political parties and vote and participate in the 2005 Iraqi elections. Shia are the majority party in the Iraqi parliament. Shia uses religion as a shield, knowing it is strong enough to mobilize the mass and defeat any secular movements. This was true with the Iranian Revolution in 1979 led by Khomeini and with Hezbollah's 2006 war against Israel and recent attempt to overthrow the current Lebanese government. In Iraq, it was Ayatollah Muhammad Ali al-Sistani (آية الله علي السستاني)[11] who brought Shia together and helped them organize themselves to become the dominant power in the constitution of the new Iraq after Saddam.

Shia in general blame the Sunni Muslims for the persecution and murder of half of the Shia. They hold the Sunni responsible for banishing, imprisoning and murdering eleven of The Twelve Imams[12] who are sacred and essential to the Shia system of worship. The Shia use Ashura processions and the passion play to rebel against the wrongs and injustices they have suffered during centuries of oppression, just as Husayn rebelled against Yazid to achieve a religiously upright society.

With the rise of Shia as the ruling power in Iraq, Sunni politicians are afraid that Khomeini's dream of expanding the Iranian Revolution has come true. Autocratic leaders are afraid of Ashura-based slogans and beliefs: the ruler is wrong and

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[11] Ayatollah Muhammad Ali al-Sistani(آية الله علي السستاني) is one of the most influential Shia cleric in Iraq.

[12] In Shi'ism, The Twelve Imams are the twelve spiritual and political leaders of the Islamic empire after Muhammad. They include: Ali bin Abi Talib, Hasan bin Ali, Husayn bin Ali, Ali bin Husayn (Zayn al-'abidin), Muhammad bin Ali Baqir, Ja'far bin Muhammad, Musa bin Ja'far Kazim, Ali bin Musa (Reza), Muhammad bin Ali Taq (sometimes called Jaway and Ibn al-Rida), Ali bin Muhammad Naqi (sometimes referred to by the title of Hadi), Hasan bin Ali 'Askari, The promised Mahdi (it is believed that he will come soon in the future).

corrupted, there should be no separation between religion and politics, the government should not base its system on Islamic religion; and the ruler should be a cleric and a prominent Shia leader. Sunni believe that these Shia demands are leading to animosity and a schism among Muslims.

A century ago, the famous anthropologist Emyrs Peters studied a Lebanese Shia village where he found that the Ashura performance was “conservative device, sustaining not challenging the existing order.” He writes:

> What the Play did was to give the vast audience a glimpse of the kind of world they could anticipate when evil triumphs. What was depicted was a world of madness, a world of complete unreason, a world without order of any sort. It did not depict a revolutionary situation of one group supplanting another—indeed, the peasantry could never supplant the Learned Families in this sense, for the peasants are far too numerous. What it showed was the chaos that would result if the Learned Families lost their control of village affairs. (Peters as cited in Norton 67)

I strongly agree with Peters that the original play was mainly attempting to depict what the world would be like if the evil triumphed. Comparing Peter’s description of the history of Ashura play to the contemporary presentations, we see that today the play heightens tension among people of different political and religious backgrounds. For example, in Lebanon, Hezbollah politicians advantageously use Ashura sentiments to challenge and resist the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. This often results in people expressing themselves in violent outbreaks of revolt and other political activities. Men motivated by the love of power and political gain take full advantage of these

feelings. For instance, such men take motivation from the historical fact that the Abbasid dynasty rose to power through their kinship with the Holy Family and through the loyalty of Shia Muslims.

Personally, I have Shia relatives belonging to past generations who tell me that the Ashura play was innocent and done only for religious purposes, but is now taking another direction away from religion. Once politics and religion are mixed together, people get confused and the result can be unsatisfactory. For example, Shia politicians use religion as a way to get attention by appealing to what people already believe (just like in *Dr. Faustus* when Mephistopheles comes to Dr. Faustus in the shape of priest).

In conclusion, the Ashura is a symbol of disagreement between Sunni and Shia Muslims and of the identity of Shia Muslims around the world. Ashura is the social and religious manifestation of the historical event of the massacre of Imam Husayn and his men in Karbala in 680 AD. With this understanding of what gave birth to the Ashura performance, we will now look at the ritualistic and theatrical characteristics of the performance itself.

2. Characteristics of Ashura

Ashura celebration is a complex event composed of a set of activities and behaviors that are ritualistic and theatrical in nature. Before discussing such aspects

of Ashura, I want to start first by defining of the terms *ritual* and *theatre* to show the difference between the two in general.

Richard Schechner defines the word ritual as “asking for trouble” because of its various meanings “as concept, praxis, process, ideology, yearning experience, function” (228). According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), ritual is “The prescribed form or order of religious or ceremonial rites,” and “a ritual act or ceremonial observance.” In later use ritual is defined by the OED as “an action or series of actions regularly or habitually repeated,” or “repeated actions or patterns of behavior having significance within a particular social group.” In general, a ritual "is a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests." The term theatre, according to OED, means “Something represented as a theatre in relation to a course of action performed or a spectacle displayed; esp. a place or region where some thing or action is presented to public view (literally or metaphorically).” It is important to point out that I will use the terms *drama* and *theatre* interchangeably in this thesis.

Schechner and Appel, in their book, *By Means of Performance*, talk about theatre as being found “in industrial, pre-electronic societies” as opposed to “nonindustrial societies” where the stress and attention is on ritual (8). To Victor Turner’s *The Anthropology of Performance*:

> dramas, at their simplest, are literary compositions that tell a story, usually of human conflict, by means of dialogue and action, and are performed by actors and presented to an audience, the nature of degree of whose

> involvement and participation varies from culture to culture. … A drama is never really complete, as its etymology suggests, until it is performed, that is, acted on some kind of a stage before an audience. (*The Anthropology of Performance* 27)

Wole Soyinka, a Nigerian writer, claims that theatre evolved from ritual when he describes the Nigerian theatre evolving from a specific funeral ritual:

> It is, however, commonly agreed that what started out probably as a ritualistic ruse to effect the funeral obsequies of an Oyo king had, by the midcentury, evolved into a theatrical form in substance and practice. From an annual celebration rite of the smuggling in of the corps of that king and its burial, the *egungun* ancestral play became, firstly, a court re-enactment, then a secular form of performance… (Soyinka as cited in Huxley and Noel 373).

Schechner considers behavior in ritual and theatre as "rearranged, condensed, exaggerated and made rhythmic" (231). He goes to say that theatre works by way of a more complex process than ritual does. In theatre, "the actor's performance is a representation of a representation" (Schechner 235). Schechner further writes, "The actor who plays Oedipus or Lear or Willie Loman is that 'character' who itself is not a 'real person'. There may be no 'real person' at all" (234). Schechner gives a visual for this description:

[victim] → character → actor : : audience ← [society] (234)

Also according to Schechner, in ritual "a layer of representation is stripped away from the actor's side. There is no character. The priest, an actor on behalf of Christ, faces the congregation which, like the theatre audience, represents society, in

this case the society of Christians" (235). Schechner uses the word "victim" to show that the person is bound or sacrificed to something in a situation:

[victim] → actor : : congregation ← [society](235)

The Nigerian critic Soyinka mentions an event called *Afikpo* in south-east Nigeria to demonstrate the difference between ritual and theatre. The *Afikpo* event is composed of two components, *okumkpa* and *oje ogwu*. The latter are "balletic sequences," whereas the former are "mimetic sequences" (Soyinka as cited in Huxley and Noel 375). Both are audience oriented, however *oje ogwu* is measured aesthetically regardless of what the actual movements may symbolize while the actual movements and what they mean are of large importance in *okumkpa*, according to Soyinka (375). Soyinka claims that unlike ritual, theatre often is used as device to comment on social issues of a specific community.

To Richard Schechner, ritual is both "sacred and secular" and the meaning difference between the two is like those between "work" and "play." He writes about the origin of rituals:

> Rituals have been considered: 1) as part of evolutionary development of animals; 2) as structures with formal qualities and definable relationships; 3) as symbolic systems of meaning; 4) as performative actions or processes; 5) as experiences. These categories overlap … Whatever the future of ritual, its past is pedigreed … Ethologically speaking, ritual is ordinary behavior transformed by means of condensation, exaggeration, repetition, and rhythm into specialized sequences of behavior serving specific functions usually having to do with mating, hierarchy, or territoriality. In animals, ritualized behavior is often set in "fixed action patterns" elicited automatically by certain kinds of stimuli. These patterns are augmented

> and highlighted by conspicuous body parts that have evolved over time for use in "ritual displays" _ the moose's horns, the peacock's tail, and the red rump of a baboon in estrus, the brilliant colors of any number of fish species. (Schechner 228)

Schechner believes that ritual works by asking question: "You get the message, don't you!?!"(230), while Singer sees behaviors that involve readings, recitations of sacred text, wedding ceremonies, and others related to religion and ritual as "cultural performance" (23). To Singer, each one of these "cultural performances" have "a definitely limited time span, or at least a beginning and an end, an organized program of activity, a set of performers, audience, and a place and occasion of performance" (Singer as cited in Turner's "The Anthropology" 23).

I tend to agree with Singer than Schechner because I believe that the function of ritual is more profound than just asking questions. I am more incline to agree with what Singer says because I find ritual to be an organized set of behavior that provides a symbolic system of meaning, something I will expand on in the next section.

2.1 The Ritualistic Elements of Ashura

Using Schechner's characterization of ritualized behavior, Ashura is a "rearranged, condensed, exaggerated and made rhythmic" performance (231). Early studies show that in the sixteenth century, Ashura was a series of pure ritualistic behaviors such as recitations and public procession only. As the dynamics of the society changed, Ashura developed to include theatrical aspects as well (Ayoub 56). It is repeated over and over every year during specific time span. Because of this

specific time span (i.e. the tenth of Muharram), it is condensed (what happened over years is manifested and delivered on one day through a stereotyped sequence of activities like fasting, public processions (including poetry recitations, Touirij marathon, self-flagellation, and Tatbeer).

Muslims, in general, voluntarily fast (صوم) on the ninth and tenth days of Muharram. The purpose of fasting in Islam is to raise awareness among people about important religious themes by refraining from everyday pleasures. The tenth of Muharram is important because for Sunni Muslims it is the day when Allah saved His prophet, Moses, from tyranny. The fasting ritual is also undertaken by the Jewish people who commemorate Moses liberation from the Egyptians. After Moses and hundreds of years, Muhammad became a prophet and witnessed the Jewish people fasting on the tenth of Muharram. When he asked them why they are fasting, they told him that it is because Allah saved Moses and his people from the Pharaoh. After this, Muhammad and his people (Muslims, Shia and Sunni) decided to also fast on this blessed day. Fasting is not obligatory on this day like the fasting of Ramadan. Yet, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) laid great emphasis on it. Today, Sunni and Shia Muslims both observe this fasting day, but for different reason. The Sunni fast because the prophet, Muhammad, told them to do so. Shia Muslims fast on this day to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Husayn.

To fast, the Muslim people usually wake up one hour before dawn. This time is called *suhoor* (also spelled as *sehur* and *sahur*) (سحور). During suhoor, people consume their meal in preparation for 12-14 hours of fasting and then refrain from

eating and drinking from dawn until sunset. Part of the fasting ritual includes making special food. After *suhoor* and after having prayed *salat al-fajr* (*dawn prayer* = الفجر صلاة) around six a.m., Iraqi Muslims start preparing a very special type of food for Iftar (افطار)[13] in their own houses. This famous, pudding-like food, is known to shia and sunni Muslims as Hareesa (or Harissa= هريسة). It is made of simple ingredients such as wheat+water+salt+sugar. The wheat grains are soaked completely overnight so that they can be easily cooked. Both men and women gather to make this blessed food that takes 3-4 hours to cook and is given out as charity and eaten when the sun sets on Iftar. This simple food is made and consumed in recognition of Husayn and his family being under siege for three days without food and water on their way to Karbala. For Shia, Hareesa symbolizes blessings for the soul of Imam Husayn.

The most dominant element of the Ashura ritual is the public procession (in Arabic it is called *Mawakeb al-Husayniyah*). The procession starts after the cooking of Hareesa around nine a.m. and continues until midnight. Millions of people from around the world flock into Karbala to take part in the commemoration of Imam Husayn's martyrdom. Shia Muslims carry flags of black, red, and white along with large pictures of Imam Husayn. Rigorous security measures are taken to protect worship places like the Husayniyah assembly (مجالس) and shrines and mosques that are open for the commemoration of Husayn bin Ali, and to protect Shia pilgrims

[13] Iftar (افطار) is an evening meal eaten by Muslims when they break their fast at the time of sunset during theIslamic month (Ramadan) or any other special Islamic day like Ashura.

from suicide and roadside or car bombs that kill and wound dozens of people every year.

Public processions are marked by poetry recitations, Touirij marathon, self-flagellation, and Tatbeer. Reciting poetry has an important place in the Islamic world, specifically in Iraq. The poets recite poetry, describing the emotion and praising and depicting what happened to Husayn, his family, and his followers in order to stir sorrow in the hearts and minds of the listeners. Ayoub in his book *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*, notes an important point, saying that the poet and the audience are aware the picture presented is an exaggeration of facts of what happened at the Battle of Karbala. Never-the-less, such descriptions are ways of connecting and stirring the emotions of listeners, and become the history of the way people lived.

The second phase of the public procession ritual is the Touirij marathon (طويريج ركضة). Touirij, about twenty-two kilometers outside the city of Karbala, is one of the towns in the district of Karbala. After their afternoon prayer (صلاة), people start running from the town of Touirij, over the Touirij Bridge, to Husayn's shrine on Imam Husayn Street in the center of city of Karbala. While running, they slap and hit their heads with their hands and say "Ya Husayn!" (Ya Hussain)[14] in support of Imam Husayn. The runners enter the shrine from the front gate and pray for Husayn and then exit from the opposite gate to go back and proceed to the Ashura rituals. The

[14] Ya Husayn or Ya hussain, meaning Oh Husayn, is an Arabic phrase pronounced by the Shia Muslims during the Ashura performance to invoke the commemoration of Imam Husayn.

Touirij marathon symbolizes salvation because people of Karbala, before the battle, did not support Imam Husayn as they promised, which lead to his death[15].

After the marathon around two p.m., self-flagellation starts. Dressed in black and walking in processions through the streets of their city, Shia men and women, and even children of 1-12 years old, whip themselves and slap their chests and chant for the love of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn. They flagellate themselves with chains (these chains sometimes have knives at their ends), causing deep cuts and bloodshed. Some participants go beyond merely whipping, and also perform slapping and chanting. Shia males and youths do *Tatbeer (Tatbir) (تطبير)*, which refers to the cutting of the forehead with sharp knives of different sizes to express loyalty and deep love for Imam. Those who do Tatbeer usually wear white shrouds as a symbol of sacrifice and to allow blood to be easily seen on the fabric. During the ritual scene, ambulances and doctors are present to prevent any serious injuries during the flagellating and Tatbeer.

One incident that gave birth to Tatbeer occurred when Zaynab, Husayn's sister, saw her brother's head and could not control her emotions. She hit her forehead against the harness of the camel she was on and blood came out then she lamented on her brother in verse:

> … O my brother, behold Fatima [that is his daughter] speak to her for her heart is nigh melting. O my brother, your compassionate heart towards us, why has it become hard as stone. O my brother, if you could only see Zayn alAbidin [his son]

[15] To watch the marathon, view the link below:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=er_Bpqe9sGo

> captive and orphaned, unable to move. Each time he receives the painful blows, he cries to you in tears and humiliation. O brother, draw him to you, embrace him and calm his frightened heart. How humiliating it is for an orphan to call upon his father when he is nowhere to come to his rescue. (Majlisi as cited in Ayoub 173)

There are those who believe, as I do, that Tatbeer and other kinds of mortification of the body are violence against the body and should be stopped. Such practices leave permanent scars, require large budgets and help the spread of STDs on a wide scale. Many people resent these practices, but in the Ashura ritual, Shia embrace them. Despite its negative side effects, Tatbeer functions as means of redemption of one's sins. Schechner mentions that two important historical incidents in Western culture demonstrate that something is done to allow for potential redemption:

> The first-time or "original" violence of real life is anything but redemptive. Humans need to "make something out" of the violence of real life, if at first only by repetition. The rebroadcasting of events like the assassination of John F. Kennedy or the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle are kinds of low-level ritualizing, an attempt to absorb and transform the violence of the event itself into something redemptive." (232)

Like the two examples in the direct quote above, Tatbeer is depicted being done against one's body in order to absorb high-level violence, like public riots and to transform it into something redemptive (See Fig. 2).

Figure 2: Tatbeer[16]

Sunni Muslim Mufti Muhammad Taqi Usmani, one of the leading Islamic scholars living today, writes his opinion about Tatbeer, lamenting the practice and saying:

> The Holy Prophet, Sall-Allahu alayhi wa sallam, has forbidden us from holding the mourning ceremonies on the death of any person. The people of jahiliyyah (ignorance) used to mourn over their deceased through loud lamentations, by tearing their clothes and by beating their cheeks and chests. The Holy Prophet, Sall-Allahu alayhi wa sallam, stopped the Muslims from doing all this and directed them to observe patience by saying "Innaa lillaahi wa innaa ilayhi raaji'oon". A number of authentic Ahaadith are available on the subject. To quote only one of them:
> "He is not from our group who slaps his chest, tears his clothes and cries in the manner of the people of jahiliyyah." (Sahih Bukhari)
> All the authentic jurists are unanimous on the point that the mourning of this type is impermissible. Even Sayyidna Husain, Radi-Allahu anhu, shortly before his demise, had advised his beloved sister Sayyidah Zainab, Radi-Allahu anha, at not to mourn over his death in this manner. He said, "My dear sister! I swear upon you that in case I die you shall not tear your clothes, nor scratch your face, nor curse anyone for me or pray for your death." (Usmani)

[16] All photographs featured in figures 2-4 are provided by Iraqi photographer, Yarb Talal. For further information e-mail: Yarbt2004@gmail.com

Shia historians and theologians report that the trend of Tatbeer came from Christianity. Story goes that the founder of the Safavid state in Iran, Shah Ismail (1501-1736 AD), who was seeking the help of the British to get rid of the Ottoman empire and invade Iraq, went on tour to England in around 1556 AD and attended Christian flagellation processions held in memory of Jesus Christ. He saw the Christians were flagellating themselves and doing Tatbeer for the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The British were promoting self-flagellation and Shah Ismail embraced it and took it to his people in Iran. From there, it spread to the surrounding countries, including Iraq (Alhaydary). I think this incident shows how strong an influence England had at that time. They had a strong, successful culture which was able to convince people to accept certain ways of life. It also suggests that Christianity and Islam have common roots from a ritualistic standpoint, and that these two religions were more open to each other than today. Recent centuries witness that people of different religions are in constant conflict, like the current media attention to Muslims being accused of terrorism.

A final characteristic of the Ashura ritual is that during the processions, Ashura is made rhythmic. Drums are the main musical instrument used since other kinds of music and musical instruments are forbidden in Islam. Muslims believe that music stirs desires and leads people out of control. Islam is not against having desire, but it believes in disciplining and controlling them. According to these drum beats, Shia mourners, both male and female, chant in the processions of Imam Husayn, and lament, saying “Ya Husayn.”

In addition to being a means to reduce outward expressions of violence, ritualistic elements of Ashura also have a therapeutic function of helping the participants to release anxieties. Psychologically speaking, these ritualistic series of behaviors bring the participants together in solidarity when sharing moments such as making Hareesa, chanting and flogging. It is believed that this day gathers all Muslims and non-Muslims as one heart, breaking the bars of religious discrimination. The emotional bonds created during this repetitive assembling are played over and over in memory, contributing to a sense that individuals belong to a group that can be a safe refuge and to reinforce the ideology and identity of the Shia.

Schechner stresses the importance of all human rituals in general as being an "answer to deal with crisis. Individual and collective anxieties are relieved by rituals whose qualities of repetition, rhythmicity, exaggeration, condensation, and simplification stimulate the brain, releasing endorphins directly into the bloodstream yielding rituals second benefit, a relief from pain, a surfeit of pleasure" (233). In Ashura, the repetition of the rituals being done every year and the exaggeration of aspects like flagellation are examples of what Schechner is describing. During flagellation process, the liminality phenomenon can be observed. First conceptualized by Arnold van Gennep and later taken up by Victor Turner, in anthropology liminality means "a threshold" (The Anthropology 25) that happens in the middle stage of rituals when the participant is no longer in an old or new state, but in between. For example, many Shia parents encourage their 12-15-year-old

son to flagellate and do Tatbeer, thinking that flagellation and Tatbeer are signs of strength and manhood (See Fig. 3)

Figure 3: A 14-year-old boy is flagellating himself

To sum up, the Ashura has characteristics that make it ritualistic. It is rearranged, condensed, exaggerated, and made rhythmic. The ritual aspect of Ashura has sacred and spiritual efficacy that aims to affect the present and the future of its participants through separation from secular everyday life. Fasting, processions that include poetry recitation, Touirij marathon, self-flagellation, and Tatbeer serve to purify the believer. Through spiritual actions, participants are united with God and Imam Husayn and ultimately will be rewarded with entry into Heaven. During the ritual, the believer enters into a state of spiritual purification through which salvation is obtainable.

2.2. Dramatic (theatrical) Characteristics of Ashura

This section of the thesis will answer the following questions. What are the elements that make Ashura dramatic? What makes Ashura theatrical? What kind of theatre is it? To what extent do the performers act the characters? To begin, the elements that make Ashura dramatic are the passion play, poetry recitation during processions, exaggeration, and dramatic dialogue.

Early records of the evolution of Ashura proves that it was a pure ritualistic event which included chanting, readings, recitation of the early related stories of the suffering of Imam Husayn, processions, flagellation, and lamentation sessions held in the houses of rich well-known clergies. As Shia society, language, and means of communication grew more complex, the story of Imam Husayn began to be acted. The dramatic aspects of Ashura developed in the early fifteenth century A.D. when people started to feel that the ritualistic element of the celebration were abstract in nature and not sufficient to represent the battle of Karbala. Shia Muslims knew that they needed a less abstract form or representation of the battle, so they came up with a play similar to the passion play of Christ in Christianity (Ayoub 155).

In addition to the ritualistic behavior noted above, the theatrical form of Ashura is also marked. The passion play (Tamthiliya or Ta'ziyah) (التعزية او التمثيلية) is another face of Ashura and it is performed locally by Shia communities around the world. The reenactment of the unfortunate massacre of the Imam and his followers is performed all over the Shia Muslim world including Iran, Pakistan, Iraq, India, Anatolia in Turkey and South Lebanon. Ta'ziyah (also Ta'zieh, Ta'zyeh or Ta'ziya) is the very core of

the Ashura performance. Ta'ziyah can be defined as "comfort" or "condolence." Its etymological roots are in Semitic languages from aza (عزى، عزو) which means "mourning."

Like many other theatrical events, the Ashura has performers reenact a real event for an audience (here the audience are the people who participate in the ritual aspects) in a particular space (in an open are on the streets). Ta'ziyah tells the story of Husayn and what happened to him in an episodic series of events. Using an Aristotelian structure (i.e. a beginning, middle, and end), the Ashura is a narrative of a historical nature and with a tragic ending. I think the fact that Ta'ziyah borrows the Aristotelian structure suggests that Shia Muslims were advanced socially and open to Western cultures during and after the Sassanid Empire which ruled Iraq (Mesopotamia) during 363-633 AD. This also proves that Western culture had a strong influence on other cultures. The dramatic techniques used in the Ashura ritual in general and the passion play specifically induce and ignite the spectators' emotions and feelings through *exaggeration* of the facts of how Imam Husayn and his family were treated by Yazid's men at the battle of Karbala.

Poets deliberately tend to exaggerate the Ashura tragedy through dramatic dialogue. The fact that they exaggerate the facts such as the way the Holy Family was treated by their captives, is present in many poems. Other sources and stories say that the women in the original incident were robbed of their possessions without any harm or violence being done against them by Yazid's men (Ayoub 169). One

of the poets draws a vivid and exaggerated picture of the captive women after the death of their beloved one, Husayn:

> … I can imagine Zaynab by Husayn's side, her hair disheveled. There she stopped, rubbing her hair on his bleeding neck and displaying all her hidden sorrows. And Fatimah [Husayn's daughter] quaking with fear as she saw the whip coming down to strike her side. (Shubbar as cited in Ayoub 173)

The performance is also called *Tamthiliya Waqi'a Karbala* or *Waqi'a al-Taff* (Karbala or al-Taff incident). During 680 AD, the city of Karbala was known as al-Taff (واقعة الطف). The performance can be summarized as follow:

The actors are divided into two groups: the first group is Husayn's army dressed in white and green and behind them can be seen their tents with green flags. Inside these tents is Husayn's family, alone and weeping and wailing out of fear and sadness of the possibility of losing their loved ones. Facing the first group in the opposite side is Yazid's army, who are dressed in red and yellow and carrying red flags. It is also worth mentioning that both groups wear the traditional, historic Islamic warrior costumes with swords and spears and ride on decorated horses. (See Fig. 4)

Figure 4: The Tamthiliya (or the passion play): confrontation between Husayn's and Yazid's men

The face of the actor who is acting or playing Husayn's character is not presented but rather covered with a piece of white silky fabric that gleams against the sun. It is agreed by the Islamic scholars that no one is permitted to act the prophets or other famous and important Islamic figures because of religious ethics of reverence and respect. On the other hand, Yazid-actor is of bare face and depicted as a disgusting figure to symbolize the ugly villain.

Each opponent sends a messenger on horseback to the other to negotiate a surrender or to accept the decision to fight. Husayn's family (wife, sister, children) show up at the tents and start crying and calling for Husayn not to leave them and get himself killed. Husayn talks and comforts them. Meanwhile, Yazid's efforts to make Husayn submit to him fail and the battle starts. Both sides are strong and fight with the hope of taking down the rival. The battle ends with several casualties on both sides and with the death of Husayn. Husayn is covered with blood and lying on the dusty bare ground of Karbala, the most sacred place in Iraq. Yazid has

already ordered his men to bring him Husayn's head to show the world his strength, pride, and power, and to serve as an example of disobedience. Husayn is beheaded in cold blood while his family members are crying and wailing and slapping themselves for the loss of the beloved. The head and the family are taken captives by Yazid's army to Damascus.

Poetry, rhymed in verse, is also performed in the style of an elegy (Marathi). The purpose of elegies is not "to display artistic talent," (Ayoub 158) nor the spirit of heroism in the mind of the faithful, but to evoke sorrow and weeping:

> Today rose on the heights of al-Taff [the hills of Karbala] their [the Holy Family's] mourner crying, 'Who is to care for an orphan or a sorrowful and humiliated captive.' Today the grey beard of the Mustafa [chosen one] was smeared with a blood which has become the perfume of the black-eyed houris. Today the flaming light of God was extinguished and the face of Islam flushed with anger and humiliation. (Ayoub 176)

Dramatic dialogue marks the passion play. The dialogue is either among the Holy Family or between the poet himself and the Prophet. This dialogue usually presents complaints about the wrongs the Holy Family has suffered. The leader of the celebration vividly portrays the depressed and sorrowful reactions, which become a psychological device that creates a very strong emotional atmosphere. Zaynab, Husayn's sister, describes to her grandfather, the prophet Muhammad, how Husayn was killed:

> ... O grandfather, behold Shimr treacherously wishing to slay Husayn, O what eye can control its tears. When he [Shimr] was about to let the sword fall upon him, he [Husayn] called out in a low voice 'O Thou who art the only One

(awhad), Thou are [sic] witness over them and Thou seest their wrongdoing.' (Diwan Dibil as cited in Ayoub171)

Ayoub discusses this verse in his book *Redemptive Suffering in Islam* saying that this poem is not for telling a story but rather to give an imaginative picture of the suffering of the youth after the death of Imam Husayn, stirring the feelings and emotions of the participants in the ritual (174).

Other poets try to depict a contrast between the suffering of the Holy Family and the cruelty of their captors. For instance, the women are whipped as they walk as captives to Damascus. Through this exaggerated picture, the poet wants to stir sorrow in the heart of the spectators and listeners. The poet and the audience are aware the picture presented is not what really happened, but it is a way of connecting and stirring the emotions, and it becomes the history of the way people lived that day.

This exaggeration highlights Schechner's equation of the passion play with elements of dramatic performance. The equation of the relationship between actors of the passion play and the spectators is as follows:

Husayn [victim] →the exaggerated character of real Husayn → actor: : audience ← [society]

The victim is Husayn who was sacrificed and considered as a redemptive symbol to Shia. The actor is a representation of a representation. Actor-Husayn is the character who himself is not the *real-Husayn*. The character of Husayn is an

exaggerated version of the real Husayn. Even other characters are exaggerated to an extent that makes them different.

In conclusion, in the passion play, the elements of exaggeration and dramatic dialogue are integrated into the work to form the theatrical aspects of the Ashura performance. The mission of the theatrical elements is to bring the audience with the actors. Schechner would say that the theatrical elements of Ashura are not designed to be entertaining in a sense of keeping people happy but to engage people with what is going on. The emotional atmosphere and the theatrical elements lead the spectators to experience some pleasure despite the tragic ending of the play.

3. Conclusion

How does ritual and theatre work together to form the overall Ashura performance? The ritual Ashura has an intrinsic function whereas the theatrical Ashura has an extrinsic one. The ritual elements (fasting, processions, and flagellation) work in collaboration to help induce the spirit and emotion in the participants. They are connected spiritually and emotionally with God and their martyrdom Husayn. There is no participant-audience relationship. The presence of audience is of little or no importance to the success of the ritual.

The theatrical elements (the passion play, exaggeration and dramatic dialogue) bring the audience and actors together, the relationship with the audience having been irrelevant during the ritual part of the performance. In order to succeed, the stage

drama needs an audience who reacts to what is going on. Unlike other outdoor theatres, Ashura theatre has no limits on space, audience size, and seating. Where ritual is one temporal frame (i.e. it has connection to the present only), the passion play has two temporalities. It connects the present to the past. The passion play is the concrete manifestation of what had happened back in 680 AD. It works as a time machine which takes the audience thousands of years back without taking them out of the present. This process is entertaining but not in a happy way. The audience cries and wails, slapping their faces and chests for the unfairness done to the Household. The spectators add protest to the performance as the Guerrilla theater of San Francisco Mime Troupe did to 1960s' cultural politics "expressing their collective dissent from a society they saw as morally bankrupt, racist, militaristic, and culturally stultifying" (Braunstein and Doyle 72). The long hours of the Ashura and the passion play causes some people to faint out of thirst and exhaustion. So, it is entertaining, but not in the common sense of the word.

The ritualistic and the theatrical elements of Ashura function in an organized spectrum on an interconnected basis (i.e. without the ritualistic aspects, the theatrical aspects would be less effective and vice versa). The two aspects are important and complement each other to form the overall performance.

The long standing history of the Muslim religion has been adapted in multiple ways such as the practice of Ashura. It is a combination of this rich history and the ritualistic and theatrical expression of such history through Ashura that makes this religious tradition worth such investigation.

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